DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 430 344 EC 307 192

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TITLE Dual Exceptionalities. ERIC Digest E574.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education, Reston, VA.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO EDO-99-2
PUB DATE 1999-04-00
NOTE 4p.
CONTRACT ED-99-CO-0026
AVAILABLE FROM ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education, Council for Exceptional Children, 1920 Association Drive, Reston, VA 20191-1589; Tel: 800-328-0272 (Toll Free); e-mail: ericec@cec.sped.org; Web site: http://www.ericec.org
PUB TYPE ERIC Publications (071) -- ERIC Digests in Full Text (073)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Ability Identification; Attention Deficit Disorders; Disability Identification; Elementary Secondary Education; *Gifted Disabled; Hyperactivity; *Special Needs Students; *Student Characteristics; Student Evaluation; Student Needs
IDENTIFIERS ERIC Digests

ABSTRACT

Gifted students with disabling conditions remain a major group of underserved and understimulated youth. This digest stresses the importance of both accommodating the disability appropriately while recognizing and nurturing the individual's intellectual strengths. Discussion of assessment is followed by a series of lists intended to assist parents and teachers in recognizing intellectual giftedness in the presence of a disability: gifted students with visual impairments, gifted students with physical disabilities, gifted students with hearing impairments, and gifted students with learning disabilities. Three additional lists are intended to help distinguish between gifted students who are bored and students who have an attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. The final section considers implications for students with dual exceptionalities in lists which address implications for identification, instruction, and classroom dynamics. (DB)

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ED 430 344

ERIC DIGEST

ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON DISABILITIES AND GIFTED EDUCATION

THE COUNCIL FOR EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN

DUAL EXCEPTIONALITIES

APRIL 1999

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APRIL 1999 E574 EDO-99-2

Dual Exceptionalities

Colleen Willard-Holt

Gifted students with disabling conditions remain a major group of underserved and understimulated youth (Cline, 1999). The focus on accommodations for their disabilities may preclude the recognition and development of their cognitive abilities. It is not unexpected, then, to find a significant discrepancy between the measured academic potential of these students and their actual performance in the classroom ((Whitmore & Maker, 1985). In order for these children to reach their potential, it is imperative that their intellectual strengths be recognized and nurtured, at the same time as their disability is accommodated appropriately.

ASSESSMENT

Identification of giftedness in students who are disabled is problematic. The customary identification methods—standardized tests and observational checklists—are inadequate, without major modification. Standard lists of characteristics of gifted students may be inadequate for unmasking hidden potential in children who have disabilities. Children whose hearing is impaired, for example, cannot respond to oral directions, and they may also lack the vocabulary which reflects the complexity of their thoughts. Children whose speech or language is impaired cannot respond to tests requiring verbal responses. Children whose vision is impaired may be unable to respond to certain performance measures, and although their vocabulary may be quite advanced, they may not understand the full meaning of the words they use (e.g., color words). Children with learning disabilities may use high-level vocabulary in speaking but be unable to express themselves in writing, or vice versa. In addition, limited life experiences due to impaired mobility may artificially lower scores (Whitmore & Maker, 1985). Since the population of gifted/disabled students is difficult to locate, they seldom are included in standardized test norming groups, adding to the problems of comparison.

In addition, gifted children with disabilities often use their intelligence to try to circumvent the disability. This may cause both exceptionalities to appear less extreme: the disability may appear less severe because the child is using the intellect to cope, while the efforts expended in that area may hinder other expressions of giftedness.

The following lists are intended to assist parents and teachers in recognizing intellectual giftedness in the presence of a disability.

Characteristics of Gifted Students with Specific Disabilities

Gifted Students with Visual Impairment

__fast rate of learning
__superior memory
__superior verbal communication skills and vocabulary
__advanced problem-solving skills
__creative production or thought that may progress more slowly than sighted students in some academic areas
__ease in learning Braille
__great persistence
__motivation to know
__sometimes slower rate of cognitive development than sighted students
__excellent ability to concentrate
(Whitmore & Maker, 1985)

Gifted Students with Physical Disabilities

__development of compensatory skills
__creativity in finding alternate ways of communicating and accomplishing tasks
__impressive store of knowledge
__advanced academic skills
__superior memory
__exceptional problem-solving skills
__rapid grasp of ideas
__ability to set and strive for long-term goals
__greater maturity than age mates
__good sense of humor
__persistence, patience
__motivation to achieve
__curiosity, insight
__self criticism and perfectionism
__cognitive development that may not be based on direct experience
__possible difficulty with abstractions
__possible limited achievement due to pace of work
(Cline, 1999; Whitmore & Maker, 1985; Willard-Holt, 1994)

Gifted Students with Hearing Impairments

__development of speech-reading skills without instruction
__early reading ability
__excellent memory
__ability to function in the regular school setting
__rapid grasp of ideas
__high reasoning ability
__superior performance in school
__wide range of interests
__nontraditional ways of getting information
__use of problem-solving skills in everyday situations
__possibly on grade level
__delays in concept attainment
__self starters
__good sense of humor
__enjoyment of manipulating environment
__intuition
__ingenuity in solving problems
__symbolic language abilities (different symbol system)
(Cline, 1999; Whitmore & Maker, 1985)

Gifted Students with Learning Disabilities

__high abstract reasoning ability
__good mathematical reasoning ability
__keen visual memory, spatial skills
__advanced vocabulary
__sophisticated sense of humor
__imaginative and creative
__insightful
__exceptional ability in geometry, science, arts, music
__good problem-finding and -solving skills
__difficulty with memorization, computation, phonics, and/or spelling

__distractibility and/or disorganization
__supersensitivity
__perfectionism
__grasp of metaphors, analogies, satire
__comprehension of complex systems
__unreasonable self expectations
__often, failure to complete assignments
__difficulties with sequential tasks
__wide variety of interests
(Baum, Owen, & Dixon, 1991; Silverman, 1989)

Research indicates that in many cases, a child is diagnosed with ADHD when in fact the child is gifted and reacting to an inappropriate curriculum (Webb & Latimer, 1993). The key to distinguishing between the two is the pervasiveness of the "acting out" behaviors. If the acting out is specific to certain situations, the child's behavior is more likely related to giftedness; whereas, if the behavior is consistent across all situations, the child's behavior is more likely related to ADHD. It is also possible for a child to be BOTH gifted and ADHD. The following lists highlight the similarities between giftedness and ADHD.

Characteristics of Gifted Students Who Are Bored

__Poor attention and daydreaming when bored
__Low tolerance for persistence on tasks that seem irrelevant
__Begin many projects, see few to completion
__Development of judgment lags behind intellectual growth
__Intensity may lead to power struggles with authorities
__High activity level; may need less sleep
__Difficulty restraining desire to talk; may be disruptive
__Question rules, customs, and traditions
__Lose work, forget homework, are disorganized
__May appear careless
__Highly sensitive to criticism
__Do not exhibit problem behaviors in all situations
__More consistent levels of performance at a fairly consistent pace
(Cline, 1999; Webb & Latimer, 1993)

Characteristics of Students with ADHD

__Poorly sustained attention
__Diminished persistence on tasks not having immediate consequences
__Often shift from one uncompleted activity to another
__Impulsivity, poor delay of gratification
__Impaired adherence to commands to regulate or inhibit behavior in social contexts
__More active, restless than other children
__Often talk excessively
__Often interrupt or intrude on others (e.g., butt into games)
__Difficulty adhering to rules and regulations
__Often lose things necessary for tasks or activities at home or school
__May appear inattentive to details
__Highly sensitive to criticism
__Problem behaviors exist in all settings, but in some are more severe
__Variability in task performance and time used to accomplish tasks
(Barkley, 1990; Cline, 1999; Webb & Latimer, 1993)

Questions to Ask in Differentiating between Giftedness and ADHD

__Could the behaviors be responses to inappropriate placement, insufficient challenge, or lack of intellectual peers?
__Is the child able to concentrate when interested in the activity?
__Have any curricular modifications been made in an attempt to change inappropriate behaviors?
__Has the child been interviewed? What are his/her feelings about the behaviors?
__Does the child feel out of control? Do the parents perceive the child as being out of control?
__Do the behaviors occur at certain times of the day, during certain activities, with certain teachers or in certain environments?

Implications for Students with Dual Exceptionalities

Commitment to identifying and nurturing the gifts of students with disabilities implies specific changes in the way educators approach identification, instruction, and classroom dynamics.

Identification

- Include students with disabilities in initial screening phase.
- Be willing to accept nonconventional indicators of intellectual talent.
- Look beyond test scores.
- When applying cutoffs, bear in mind the depression of scores that may occur due to the disability.
- DO NOT aggregate subtest scores into a composite score.
- Compare with others who have similar disabilities.
- Weight more heavily characteristics that enable the child to effectively compensate for the disability.
- Weight more heavily areas of performance unaffected by the disability.
- Allow the child to participate in gifted programs on a trial basis.

Instruction

- Be aware of the powerful role of language; reduce communication limitations and develop alternative modes for thinking and communicating.
- Emphasize high-level abstract thinking, creativity, and a problem-solving approach.
- Have great expectations: these children often become successful as adults in fields requiring advanced education.
- Provide for individual pacing in areas of giftedness and disability.
- Provide challenging activities at an advanced level.
- Promote active inquiry, experimentation, and discussion.
- Promote self-direction.
- Offer options that enable students to use strengths and preferred ways of learning.
- Use intellectual strengths to develop coping strategies.
- Assist in strengthening the student's self concept.

Classroom Dynamics

- Discuss disabilities/capabilities and their implications with the class.
- Expect participation in all activities; strive for normal peer interactions.
- Facilitate acceptance; model and demand respect for all.
- Candidly answer peers' questions.
- Treat a child with a disability the same way a child without a disability is treated.
- Model celebration of individual differences.

Gifted students with disabilities must be provided with appropriate challenges. The personal and societal costs of not developing their potential cannot be overstated.

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This publication was prepared with funding from the National Library of Education (NLE), Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI), U.S. Department of Education (ED), under contract ED-99-CO-26. The opinions expressed in this document do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of NLE, OERI, or ED. ERIC Digests are in the public domain and may be freely reproduced and disseminated, but please acknowledge your source.